ARTICLE

Women in high leadership positions at the Central Bank of Brazil

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Abstract

This research identifies the professional challenges faced by women who have risen to high leadership positions at the Central Bank of Brazil. It is an exploratory qualitative research whose empirical data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 13 (thirteen) women who occupy high leadership positions in the bank. The data set was interpreted with the aid of the thematic categorization technique. The results indicate a series of manifestations of gender stereotypes in the institution, which contribute to configuring it as a potentially embarrassing, uncomfortable, and sometimes discouraging environment for women's careers. Since there are reports that these manifestations occurred within the bank's formal selection processes, this practice seems to be, at some level, rooted in the institution's organizational culture. This research contributes to the understanding that the glass ceiling concept seems too simple to encompass all the nuances that interfere with the career path of women in the top leadership of public service. Finally, this article articulates reflections on the various barriers encountered by women who, despite the challenges encountered in a kind of professional labyrinth, managed to occupy high leadership positions in a Brazilian public institution.

Keywords: Gender. Leadership. Glass ceiling. Professional maze.

Mulheres na alta liderança do Banco Central do Brasil

Resumo

Esta pesquisa identifica os desafios profissionais enfrentados por mulheres que ascenderam a posições de alta liderança no Banco Central do Brasil (BCB). Trata-se de uma análise qualitativa exploratória, cuja coleta de dados empíricos se deu por entrevistas semiestruturadas com 13 mulheres que ocupam cargos de alta liderança no órgão público em questão. O conjunto de dados foi interpretado com o auxílio da técnica de categorização temática. Os resultados indicam uma série de manifestações de estereótipos de gênero na instituição investigada, os quais contribuem para configurá-la como um ambiente potencialmente constrangedor, incômodo e, por vezes, desestimulante para a carreira das mulheres. Uma vez que há relatos de que essas manifestações ocorreram em processos formais de seleção do banco, essa prática parece se encontrar, em algum nível, enraizada na cultura organizacional da instituição. Este artigo contribui para o entendimento de que o conceito de "teto de vidro" parece singelo demais para abarcar todas as nuances que interferem na trajetória de carreira das mulheres na alta liderança do serviço público. Ao fim, articulam-se reflexões sobre as diversas barreiras encontradas pelas mulheres que, a despeito dos desafios encontrados numa espécie de labirinto profissional, conseguiram ocupar posições de alta liderança numa instituição pública brasileira.

Palavras-chave: Gênero. Liderança. Teto de vidro. Labirinto profissional.

Mujeres en la alta dirección del Banco Central do Brasil

Resumen

Esta investigación identifica los desafíos profesionales que enfrentan las mujeres que han ascendido a posiciones de alto liderazgo en el Banco Central do Brasil. Se trata de una investigación cualitativa exploratoria, cuyos datos empíricos fueron recolectados a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas con 13 (trece) mujeres que ocupan altos cargos de dirección en el organismo público en cuestión. El conjunto de datos fue interpretado con la ayuda de la técnica de categorización temática. Los resultados indican una serie de manifestaciones de estereotipos de género en la institución investigada, que contribuyen a configurarla como un ambiente potencialmente vergonzoso, incómodo y en ocasiones desalentador para la carrera de las mujeres. Dado que existen reportes de que estas manifestaciones ocurrieron dentro de los procesos formales de selección del banco, esta práctica parece estar, en algún nivel, arraigada en la cultura organizacional de la institución. Esta investigación contribuye a la comprensión de que el concepto de techo de cristal parece demasiado simple para abarcar todos los matices que interfieren en la carrera de las mujeres en la alta dirección del servicio público. Al final, este artículo articula reflexiones sobre las diversas barreras encontradas por mujeres que, a pesar de los desafíos encontrados en una especie de laberinto profesional, lograron ocupar altos cargos de liderazgo en una institución pública brasileña.

Palabras clave: Género. Liderazgo. Techo de cristal. Laberinto profesional.

INTRODUCTION

Women's presence and participation in all types of organizations have been gradually increasing over the last four decades. From 1990 to 2019, female participation in the labor market has grown from 34.8% to 54.3% (Feijó et al., 2022). However, it is still possible to identify a timid female presence occupying high leadership positions (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2022). Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) shows that in 2019 the proportion of women in managerial positions was 37% compared to 63% of men in those positions (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2020). While the female presence in boards of directors and private sector companies is pointed out as a more recurrent practice in organizations (Infomoney, 2022), the occupation of these positions by women is below 20% of the total available positions of this type in Brazil (Felippe, 2022).

These characteristics of the context of private sector organizations in Brazil are similarly found in the Brazilian public sector (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada [Ipea], 2020). By examining the figures for leadership positions in Brazilian executive branch bodies, we can see that despite the gradual increase in the number of women in tenured positions at public institutions between 2002 and 2020, their presence in these bodies' leadership positions was considerably lower than that of men (Ipea, 2020). In 2017, only 16% of level-6 Senior Management and Advice (DAS) positions were occupied by women, whereas for level-1 positions the proportion was 52% (Ipea, 2020). In other words, at level 6, which is the most directly responsible for strategic decision making, the proportion of women is remarkably lower than that for level 1, more linked to middle-management decision making. Data from (Ipea, 2020) show that there is still no parity regarding public organizations' top leadership positions.

If we consider specifically the Central Bank of Brazil (BCB), we can see that the organization has 77% of its positions occupied by men, and 23% by women (Portal da Transparência, 2022). This proportion is not maintained when high leadership positions are considered: the difference reaches 88% at the top hierarchical level. In other words, at the BCB, women occupy only 11% of the available leadership positions (Banco Central do Brasil [BCB], 2022).

Contexts with a disproportion of women in high leadership, as found in the BCB, have encouraged debate about the possible challenges that these women are facing in their career paths until they reach high leadership positions, when that happens at all (Henderson et al., 2016). These barriers are a phenomenon that tends to be called the "glass ceiling" (Powell, 1999). In general terms, this refers to the metaphor that although women know what high leadership positions exist in the organizational hierarchy, they cannot rise to them, however much they possess technical, educational and productivity qualifications compatible with those of men with similar qualifications (Vaz, 2013).

Considering the explanation presented in this introduction, and to contribute to the debate about the relationship between women, high leadership positions and public service, this study aims to identify the professional challenges faced by women who have risen to high leadership positions in the Central Bank of Brazil, despite the many barriers that tend to hamper that professional advancement path.

THEORETICAL-EMPIRICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to address interfaces between the themes "women", "senior leadership", and "BCB", in this theoretical-empirical framework, we indicate the conceptual premises that support the thematic discussion of the research. This indication therefore guides the process of analyzing data collected in the field, carried out in a later section of this article.

In general terms, we work with 2 main subjects that support the development of research. Initially, we addressed the topic "Women, senior leadership and public service". In this section, we focus on the empirical contextualization of the research, with regard to the presence and occupation of women in the Brazilian public sector. We complemented the subject with the institutional classification that identifies leadership, management and advisory positions in the public service, a classification that we adopted as criteria for choosing research participants. With the contextualization articulated in this section, we are better able to understand the details of the professional experiences faced by women in senior leadership positions in the public service.

Next, we discuss the theoretical aspects surrounding "From the 'glass ceiling' to the metaphor of the professional labyrinth". In this section, we talk about the challenges faced by women in the workplace, not just those experienced in the public sector. This part is relevant because it theoretically articulates the presence of gender stereotypes in the workplace that, invariably, hinder women's professional trajectories. These barriers are often called "glass ceilings". However, we advance in the discussion of this concept by adding the idea of "professional labyrinth", in order to reinforce that the professional barriers experienced by women present complexities, in addition to the challenges of ascending the organizational hierarchy.

WOMEN, HIGH LEADERSHIP AND PUBLIC SERVICE

To consider the growth in women's presence in this public sector is, in a way, to track the increase in the presence of women working in the private sector (I. C. Silva et al., 2019). In the period from 1986 to 2017, for example, the private sector showed a significant increase in women's participation in the Brazilian labor market, with a growth in the number of occupied slots from 43.3% to 32.1% (Lopez & Guedes, 2020). In the public sector, on the other hand, the levels of occupation by women reached 59.3% of slots in 2017, if we consider all federative spheres in Brazil (Lopez & Guedes, 2020). In the last 35 years, growth in the occupation of job positions by women in the Brazilian public sector is a trend (Souza et al., 2019). However, it is worth noting that, in the public sector, women already occupy most of the slots, in general terms, compared to men (Ipea, 2020), a characterization contrary to what is identified in the Brazilian private sector (I. C. Silva et al., 2019).

Here, it is necessary to explore the peculiarities which are determinant to this reality in the Brazilian public sector (Escola Nacional de Administração Pública [Enap], 2006; IBGE, 2022). Women are a wide majority in the municipal and state spheres (Ipea, 2020). One explanation for this can be the recognition that some numerous public administration careers are still predominantly occupied by female public servants (Freitas, 2015). An example of this are job positions in teaching and nursing (Lopez & Guedes, 2020).

A predominância de mulheres em certos postos de trabalho e no quantitativo de vagas geral do setor público brasileiro nas esferas municipais e estaduais, não se reproduz ao analisarmos a ocupação dos cargos de DAS na esfera federal da administração pública brasileira (Ipea, 2020). Numa instituição pública da administração direta, autárquica e fundacional, os DAS, convertidos em 2021, são os cargos em que seu ocupante é responsável pelas atribuições de direção, chefia e assessoramento (Lei Complementar nº 175, 2021). São posições ocupadas mediante nomeação, de caráter provisório, e podendo ou não ser ocupadas por servidores de carreira (Vaz, 2010).

Graph 1 below details the distribution of women occupying DAS positions by year and position. It is worth noting that positions in the DAS-1 scale are considered the hierarchically lowest ones, with positions in the DAS-6 scale being the highest level (Ipea, 2020).

Graph 1
Percentage of women in DAS by year and positions
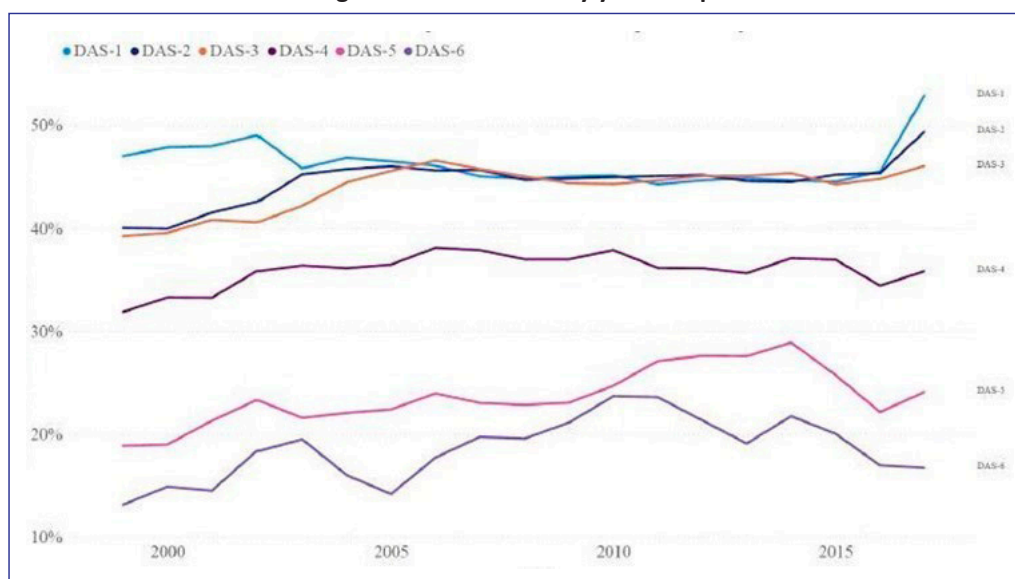
Source: Elaborated by the authors based on data from the Ipea (2020).

As we can see, Graph 1 shows that in 2017 the highest hierarchical level of a leadership position in the public sector, level DAS-6, was occupied by only 16% of women working in Brazilian public service. Moreover, it shows that only at level DAS-1, the hierarchically lowest, is the participation of women greater than 50%. The vast majority of DAS-5 and DAS-6 positions, the hierarchically highest and therefore with highest salary and strategic decision power levels, are predominantly occupied by male professionals.

Although Graph 1 suggests a slight upward trend in the proportion of women who advance to high leadership positions in the Brazilian public service, within the sector's own organizational hierarchy, this movement is still slow and irregular. One of the reasons for this is, perhaps, the fact that the permission for free appointment for DAS positions has a political connotation in the occupation of these positions, and thus the profile of their holders reflects not only the possible gender inequalities in the public sector labor market, but also in the political field that pervades these spaces (Abreu & Meirelles, 2012).

While women are the majority of the total number of public servants in the Brazilian public sector (Ipea, 2020), considering the reference year 2017, these professionals are still underrepresented in high leadership positions, i.e., DAS positions (Ipea, 2020). Somehow, this piece of evidence suggests that even in public bodies, where hiring occurs through competition via tests and certificates (Lei Complementar nº 175, 2021), there is still a significant gap regarding the occupation of high leadership positions within such bodies by women.

Aware of this underrepresentation of women in high leadership positions in public service, some studies have addressed the debate about this question. For example, in 2006, a study of the National School of Public Administration (Enap) conducted 24 interviews with employees in DAS positions and female Ministers at the time (the Minister of the Special Secretariat for Women – SPM, and the Minister of the Secretariat for the Promotion of Racial Equality – SEPPIR). The purpose was to investigate the causes of the discrepancy between men and women in high leadership positions in the public sector. Among the results, there was found to be a misconception that a greater presence of women in lower hierarchic levels would be mirrored in high leadership positions in public bodies (Enap, 2006).

An interesting aspect reported by the Enap (2006) study was that the men working at the studied public bodies were then informed that women were in smaller numbers in high leadership positions. About these men's reactions, the study mentions that they were surprised and that they said they had no perception of this difference in their work day-to-day. When asked about the reasons for this gender difference in the occupation of high leadership positions, the men ascribed it to beliefs and taboos that persist in Brazilian society: women were supposedly more committed to family and child care; men supposedly had greater ease with leadership positions, since women supposedly had less disposition to fight

for high command positions; society's patriarchal structure did not foster women's advancement; husbands' refusal to accompany them if a change of city was necessary for taking on a leadership position; and the non-existence of targets for leadership positions by gender (Enap, 2006). This set of accounts resonates into what we will debate in the next section on the theoretical empirical framework, about the question of gender stereotypes (Beltramini et al., 2022; Nganga et al., 2023) as barriers to women's career advancement.

The fact that public positions filled through competitive selection provide tenure to public servants (Lei Complementar nº 175, 2021), i.e., a public servant is ensured employment until retirement, except where acts are committed that entail the public servant's dismissal, or if they themselves request their own dismissal, when we debate the theme of women's underrepresentation in leadership positions in public service, we are not dealing with a context where an unemployment threat is at issue. We point out that, despite the principle of isonomy in public service competition, the dynamics of promotion to leadership positions succumb to political maneuvers that have historically prevented women from reaching parity in DAS positions, compared to their male peers (Ipea, 2020).

In addition, women's underrepresentation in DAS positions in the Brazilian public service is worrying. As described by the Enap (2021), about the "Essential leadership competencies for the Brazilian public sector", a public servant in a high leadership position is expected to be a "builder of value who, besides knowing the public business, is recognized as upstanding, able, inspiring, visionary, capable of driving innovation and change" (Enap, 2021, p. 3). Beyond all the strategic power that positions like these can offer in terms of policymaking, we can infer that, with this definition of the leader profile expected by the Brazilian public sector, and since these positions are predominantly occupied by men (Ipea, 2020), these characteristics are not being appreciated and/or recognized in the women working in the public sector.

If we look specifically at the case of the Central Bank of Brazil (BCB), we can see that the organization has 77% of its positions occupied by men and 23% by women (Portal da Transparência, 2022). This proportion, however, is not maintained when high leadership positions are considered: the difference reaches 88% at the highest hierarchical level, a level where only 11% of the available leadership positions are occupied by women (BCB, 2022). It should be noted that, in the BCB, only tenured employees hired through public competition can be appointed to positions equivalent to senior management and advice jobs (Lei Complementar nº 175, 2021), therefore there is no margin for addition beyond the body's workforce or political motivations for these leadership positions.

The fact that access to a tenured BCB position is universal and limited by public competition presupposes favorable conditions for gender balance in the occupation of such positions. Even so, workforce data provided by the BCB shows a strong imbalance in the number of men and women who joined the body via public competition, and an even smaller number of women in strategic high leadership positions within the Central Bank of Brazil's organizational structure (BCB, 2022).

This context, added to what has been described until this point, allows observing that there is a set of factors involved in the unequal occupation of high leadership positions by women in federal public service (Ipea, 2020). Somehow, one has the impression that the path of women working in the public sector is fraught with additional challenges to reaching high leadership positions, when this happens at all. We dare say that a journey like this is a real professional maze, a topic that we will debate in the next section.

FROM THE "GLASS CEILING" TO THE PROFESSIONAL MAZE METAPHOR

The term 'glass ceiling' was first mentioned in an article published in The Wall Street Journal in the 1980s (Hancock et al., 2018; Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000). At the time, allusions were already being made at the metaphor representing an invisible barrier in women's pursuit of professional ascension, particularly towards organizations' most strategic levels (Johns, 2013). The "glass ceiling" metaphor is an allusion to the idea that while women and other minorities in organizations are able to see and map high leadership positions that they could occupy given their professional competencies, this ascension is restricted and occurs in a smaller scale compared to their male peers (Abreu & Meirelles, 2012; Cotter et al., 2001). The invisible barrier, made of glass, blocks their ascension, even though they can see where they could be within the corporate structure (Beltramini et al., 2022; Freitas, 2015; Irigaray & Vergara, 2009; Tanure et al., 2006; Teixeira et al., 2021).

Numerous studies have looked into the metaphor and sought evidence demonstrating the existence of this barrier that prevents female advancement to high leadership, in addition to identifying the factors at play in the perpetuation of this barrier to women's professional ascension within organizations (Morley, 2007; Nganga et al., 2023; Wrigley, 2009; Zhuge et al, 2011; to name a few). Female underrepresentation in strategic sectors of all industries and spaces of power, both in the public and private sector, in academe, sports and even gastronomy, are just a few examples of the ways in which the glass ceiling impacts women's professional life (Biroli, 2010; Fragale et al., 2015; Goellner & Kessler, 2018; Haddaji et al., 2017; Maia, 2016; Miguel & Biroli, 2010).

What is observed is that the absence of women at the top of organizations is perceived in all industries, which can be an indication that, despite the level of educational and professional qualification, the gender issue is still decisive in filling positions at high hierarchical levels in organizations. Where women manage to break the organizational glass ceiling, advancing to high leadership positions, this process tends to reveal that, in this access, women are faced with a series of contradictions of occupational roles, the organization's expectations, and perceptions (by peers, work colleagues and even themselves) that challenge the validity of their occupation of high leadership positions (Beltramini et al., 2022; Nogueira, 2006). In other words, the glass ceiling metaphor seems too simple a concept to explain the set of difficulties facing women in their professional paths (Nganga et al., 2023; Stamper & McGowan, 2022).

A comparison between the career paths of men and women with equivalent education and professional experience, by Eagly and Carli (2007a), signals that women's routes tend to twine more than men's, revealing that women experience a kind of professional maze (Eagly & Carli, 2007a) in their careers. While men follow a more linear ascension course which eventually leads them to high leadership positions, women deal with more frequent obstacles that inhibit their professional progression, in this case, particularly obstacles associated with gender stereotypes (Teixeira et al., 2021). One example is the assimilation, when selecting career progression candidates, that women are supposedly more susceptible to incompatibility with occupying a high leadership position, as this would compromise motherhood (Abreu & Meirelles, 2012; Beltramini et al., 2022; Samuelson et al., 2019).

The gender stereotypes faced by women are obstacles to their ascension to high leadership positions in organizations (Beltramini et al., 2022; Bruckmüller et al., 2013; Eagly & Carli, 2007a, 2007b; Marvin, 2009; Morisson, 2002). These obstacles consolidate an idea that women experience a kind of professional maze (Eagly & Carli, 2007a). This is because the maze metaphor conceptually represents the complex path trodden by women to reach the top of the organizational hierarchy, when that happens at all (Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018; Lis, 2019). Women's journeys in organizations are not simple or straight in terms of career progression, as they suffer from greater twists and complications in their paths, not only until the organizational "ceiling" (Maia, 2016; Nganga et al., 2023).

As a metaphor, the maze represents that the pursuit of high leadership involves multiple combinations of paths to be followed in order to reach the goal; however, gender stereotypes impose on women additional challenges in these paths towards professional advancement (Marvin, 2009; Stamper & McGowan, 2022). While women are questioned throughout the process about their aspirations to high leadership positions, men are read as naturally fit for these, which gives them easier paths through the "professional maze" towards conquering positions of power (Goellner & Kessler, 2018; Teixeira et al., 2021).

According to Henderson et al (2016), to analyze the underrepresentation of women in high leadership, the maze metaphor is more appropriate than the that of the glass ceiling. In a maze, they say, the obstacles are not absolute and insurmountable at one specific hierarchic level (the highest one). To the contrary. Over the entire path to be trodden to high leadership, women meet challenging barriers and need to overcome them to reach those positions (Beltramini et al., 2022; Nganga et al., 2023). In this respect, for Morrison et al. (1991), women's ascension is being prevented not only by a "ceiling", but by the entire structure and atmosphere of corporations, therefore the barriers are not only above women, but around them in their professional day-to-day (Freitas, 2015; Morrison et al., 1991; Tanure et al., 2006; Teixeira et al., 2021).

The arguments of Morrison et al. (1991) about the "professional maze" are in line with the perspective that women in high leadership sometimes resort to support strategies so as to not succumb in this journey Some of these strategies correspond to women's participation in mentoring and sponsoring projects, understood as support actions by immediate superiors for their careers in organizations (Henderson et al., 2016). As a brief distinction, a sponsor is said to be one

who can provide defense and support for their protégé in adverse situations in the work environment (Catalyst, 2011), whereas a mentor is an experienced professional who shares with, guides and supports the development of their mentee (Ferreira & Dutra, 2010).

Spreading the debate about the professional maze, Oakley (2000) adds the discussion that the difficulties facing women in pursuit of high leadership positions are mostly related with organizational policies and practices, as well as companies' behavioral and cultural issues. With regard to behavioral issues, one aspect worth noting is the attempt at masculinization by women occupying high leadership positions (Beltramini et al., 2022; Lucas et al., 2010; Samuelson et al., 2019; Tanure et al., 2006). In an effort to simulate male behaviors in order to advance in the career, women make their speech more incisive towards teams and peers; change their working clothes to more neutral or darker tones; or even contain occasional mannerisms in speech or gestures when interacting in the work environment (Henderson et al., 2016; Irigaray & Vergara, 2009).

However, these strategies can represent a dilemma for women: by emulating a masculine leadership style, their male subordinates may develop an antipathy to the figure leading them, whereas if they adopt a more affectionate, warmer leadership style (a female stereotype), they are likely to be liked by their team, but not respected in executing leadership (Beltramini et al., 2022; Kawakami et al., 2000). These considerations led Henderson et al. (2016) to consider the idea that "women tend to adapt their feminine identities as a way of rising to strategic positions at high hierarchical levels" (Henderson et al, 2016, p. 6). There are situations where the organizational culture itself acts to perpetuate and validate gender stereotypes that suggest unfitness on the part of women to head strategic positions in the corporate world (Freitas, 2015; Munhoz, 2000).

Binging the cultural dimension into the debate about the gender stereotypes facing women in organizations involves stressing the importance of socialization in the work environment for professional success (Bruckmüller et al., 2013). Frequently, women have to strive to gain more knowledge and professional qualification as credentials to penetrate organizational socialization networks (Beltramini et al., 2022; Freitas, 2015; Saavedra et al., 2010).

In addition, sometimes a more masculine attitude, stereotyped as inherent in innate leadership in organizations, is reproduced by women in the work environment as a way of mirroring behaviors and attitudes identified in male colleagues who already occupy leadership positions (Oakley, 2000; Samuelson et al., 2019). Predominantly male characteristics, which tend to be identified in these positions, tend to be adopted by women, or they are expected to do so, when claiming career advancement opportunities towards high leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kawakami et al., 2000; Nganga et al., 2023; A. L. Silva & Sachuk, 2019).

METHOD

This is a qualitative (Godoy, 1995) and exploratory (Astley, 1985) study, as we chose first to identify the characteristics of the experiences of women working in high leadership positions at the Central Bank of Brazil, and then seek explanations for their causes and consequences. This articulation is presented throughout the interpretation and discussion sections of the results, which will be presented throughout this article.

The empirical collection of data was performed through semi-structured interviews with 13 (thirteen) public servants at the Central Bank of Brazil who hold leadership positions in this public body. The interviews were conducted during October and November 2022, through videoconference tools. The content was recorded for later transcription. The conversations had an average length of 30 to 60 minutes per participant.

The public institution selected for the interviews, the Central Bank of Brazil (BCB), is an independent federal organization created by a law, and its main objective is to ensure price stability in the country (Lei Complementar nº 175, 2021; Lei nº 4.595, 1964). The BCB was chosen mainly because it presents, throughout its history, a systematic low presence of women in its workforce, from the initial public competition stage (BCB, 2022). It is worth noting that we directly name the Central Bank of Brazil, as all the information about the organization is public and accessible to any citizen on the BCB's websites, the Federal Government Transparency Portal and in legislation published by the Federal Official Gazette and the Presidency's website (Planalto). In addition, specific BCB information was obtained by consulting the FalaBr Portal, which is publicly available under the Access to Information Law (LAI) (Lei Complementar nº 175, 2021).

On the other hand, full anonymity was ensured for the interviewees in order to prevent a vulnerable professional context for them. To differentiate the participants' accounts, pseudonyms were assigned to each of the thirteen participants. Box 1 presents the group's general characteristics.

Box 1
General characteristics of the group of study participants

GENERAL CHARACTERITICS OF THE GROUP OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS							
Pseudonym	Age group	Civil status	Children	Education	Length of service at BCB	Current position	Length in the position
Heloísa	> 50 years old	Married/ Stable union	Yes	Non-degree postgraduate studies	28 years old	Unit Head	11 years
Telma	> 50 years old	Married/ Stable union	No	Non-degree postgraduate studies	30 years	Deputy Unit Head	7 years
Patrícia	> 50 years old	Married/ Stable union	Yes	Ph.D.	28 years	Deputy Unit Head	10 years
Tatiana	35-40 years old	Married/ Stable union	Yes	Non-degree postgraduate studies	17 years	Unit Head	11 years
Mônica	45-50 years old	Married/ Stable union	Yes	Ph.D.	23 years	Deputy Unit Head	1 year
Sandra	> 50 years old	Married/ Stable union	Yes	Master's degree	17 years	Unit Head	1 year
Olga	> 50 years old	Married/ Stable union	Yes	Non-degree postgraduate studies	29 years	Deputy Unit Head	12 years
Daniela	40-45 years old	Married/ Stable union	Yes	Ph.D.	17 years	Unit Head	13 years
Estela	45-50 years old	Divorced	Yes	Ph.D.	25 years	Unit Head	6 years
Silvia	40-45 years old	Single	No	Ph.D.	21 years	Deputy Unit Head	3 years
Talita	40-45 years old	Divorced	Yes	Ph.D.	13 years	Unit Head	4 years
Júlia	30-35 years old	Married/Stable union	No	Master's degree	8 years	Deputy Unit Head	1 year
Roberta	35-40 years old	Married/Stable union	Yes	Complete undergraduate studies	11 years	Deputy Unit Head	2 years

Source: Data from the study.

Once the data had been collected, it was thematically categorized based on the recurrent themes that emerged in the interviewees' accounts. Three central categories were identified. The details of the analysis processes are presented below.

ANALYSES RESULTS

The general characterization of the group of study participants indicates that their average age is situated between 30 and 50 or more years old. For the majority (ten interviewees), the civil state indicated was married/stable union. All participants have completed undergraduate education, with most having completed non-degree graduate studies or holding graduate degrees. Regarding their length of service at the Central Bank of Brazil, the participants range from 8 to 30 years of professional activities at the BCB. Eight interviewees have been in high leadership positions at the public body for 7 years or less. The other 5 participants have been in these positions for at least 10 years, with the participant who has been for 13 years in positions of this type being the one with the greatest length of service in high leadership positions.

In addition to this description about the group of participants, accounts were collected from these women about the professional challenges faced until the process of ascension to high leadership positions at the Central Bank of Brazil. With the thematic categorization of these accounts, three main analysis categories were identified: the trade-off between career advancement and family life; socialization difficulties in a mostly male environment; and the organizational culture validating gender stereotypes. The details of contents and analysis of results are presented next.

The trade-off between career advancement and family life

One aspect repeatedly mentioned by the interviewees concerns the numerous roles played by women and the difficulties they face in reconciling the mother, wife, caregiver, and professional roles. As unit head, Heloísa's account makes the following considerations:

> We, as women, play several roles. I think there is a certain machismo rooted in our society. More recently, I discovered that it has a name: imposter syndrome. There comes a time when we say: "I'm not doing anything right, I'm not a good professional, I can't do it the way I want; I'm not a good mother, I'm not a good housewife, I'm not a good wife, I'm not a good person." You have to wake up I don't know what time to go work out, think about what you're going to do for food, see your son [...], My daughter was very sick. Many women, when they were having children, left the technical area and went to the customer service area. So, many colleagues who had excellent training dropped out and went to the clinic so they could have six hours and take their children to class.

From this excerpt, we can draw a few elements that show the feeling of insufficiency that a woman sometimes experiences in her daily life as she considers that she may not be performing any activity fully. The idea that there is a trade-off between career progression and the family role that women play or wish to play is also present in Daniela's account, unit head, from an opposite perspective: not as a woman who seeks ascension, but as a unit head who has tried to promote a female colleague:

> Women still think they need to make choices. So, both in my previous and current departments, I saw competent women who I invited and received in response: "I'm trying to get pregnant", "I'm not going to be able to handle my child and my work", "I need to be focused on family now"[...]. And I found that from them, you know? It wasn't from men. I think women still think they have to make a choice, that they can't put work and family in the same equation. I won't go into the context. I don't know if they had partners who would help, as is their work routine. But it really caught my attention hearing from women who had the opportunity to go up and chose not to go up because they wouldn't be able to reconcile the two. In an environment like the BCB, which is a public service, this is more possible.

This account presents a range of variables, very diverse ones, which are considered in this trade-off between personal/family life and career advancement, in line with what is argued by Abreu and Meirelles (2012), Beltramini et al. (2022), Tanure et al. (2006), as well as Teixeira et al. (2021). From demands (from oneself and from others) for good performance as a mother, professional and caregiver to the questioning of one's own ability to perform as required by the high positions held, to the sacrifice of personal relationships, and even some regret, among others.

The conjunction of these accounts corroborates the idea of the tangle of possibilities and peculiarities in the paths of underrepresented groups, among which are women, inherent in the concept of professional maze mentioned by Beltramini et al. (2022), Bruckmüller et al. (2013), Eagly and Carli (2007a, 2007b), Marvin (2009), Morrison (2002). While remarkable, the 'family vs. career' trade off was not the only factor strongly pointed out by the interviewees: the vast majority of men in the organization's workforce, as will be seen below, is a key factor in the career evolution of women in the BCB.

Socialization difficulty in a mostly male environment

A second theme that emerged recurrently in the interviewees' accounts regards the importance of socialization with work colleagues in order to have more career progression opportunities. In the account of Estela, unit head, who holds a unit head position, she explains the importance of making connections to be considered for growth opportunities, and the conflicts that prevented her, at different points in her life, from engaging more in networking:

> Women don't network. So, for example, my colleagues would come down every day to have lunch together. And there were colleagues with whom I was a little embarrassed, because I know my wife would be jealous. But I think there is much more to man than networking within the bank. And this is important to move up, because when a person chooses someone, it is not just because of their technical competence. It also looks at the person's personality, the ability to deal with others. So it ends up that the person feels more confident about calling someone they know.

For the participant Júlia, deputy unit head, who is the youngest in a unit head position, networking manifests itself so decisively in the BCB that it directly influences one's access to opportunities and invitations for leadership positions:

> We call to work those who are used to living with us and have good relationships. Men have lunch with other men, talk to other men and learn about other men's work. As a boss myself, when a vacancy opens up, I think about who I know from my environment, who would be a good person. Then you go within the range of people you know. And that perpetuates. Men talk to other men, then when there is an opportunity for advancement, they call other men. I kind of mold myself to that environment. For example, I learned to talk about football. Although I like football, but I learned. You learn to enter that environment. But I think it's a mixture of that. It's the question of the network, of contacts. Have a network of contacts.

In the accounts above, it is possible to see that career advancement at the BCB is intrinsically linked to one's network, which is in line with what is mentioned by Nganga et al. (2023). We will see that according to the interviewees, the female condition puts them at a disadvantage from the start of the race to leadership positions, which corroborates what is affirmed by Beltramini et al. (2022), Irigaray and Vergara (2009), and Tanure et al. (2006). This perception is also in line with Saavedra et al. (2010), who say that the absence of this social capital (networking) can have a negative impact on women's professional advancement, even more than academic education and other professional qualifications, for example.

This reflection about the impacts on women's professional advancement points to the dimension of gender stereotypes and their influence on women's paths. This aspect was observed in the categorization of interviewees' accounts. And apparently, gender stereotypes gain space when the BCB's organizational culture validates the reproduction of these stereotypes, as will be seen in the examples below.

The organizational culture validating gender stereotypes

During the interviews, some accounts brought up the complaint about an organizational culture at the BCB that, in a way, validates genders stereotypes. Apparently, this validation could work as barriers to interpersonal relationship and therefore to the professional development of their careers towards the top of the organization hierarchy. As unit head, Talita's account exemplifies nuances of this view in sharing about an occasion when she had to behave more imposingly to gain, at least initially, the respect she was due from her immediate supervisor:

> I don't know if this can be said in general within the bank, but when I joined, I didn't see any difficulties due to the fact that I was a woman. Now, at the same time, I was always careful. And, again, I think it's largely due to my experience as a teacher, having a certain composure. I have always felt the need to have a certain composure because of my gender.

In another account, this time by Olga, deputy unit head, it is possible to note situations at the BCB where a woman is criticized for a particular attitude that, in the interviewee's view, would not be criticized had it been displayed by a man. In the end, the account also shows an interesting reflection about decision-makers' apparent fear of having a woman leading men:

Why so many women don't want to accept a heavier position? Because we really have to work like crazy, everybody who's in higher positions has to work a lot, and a woman always has to do more to justify being in that position. So if a guy works 10 hours a day, a woman has to work twelve. If the guy checks his WhatsApp from the time he wakes up to the time he goes to sleep, the woman doesn't even sleep! Because the woman always has to be much more available. Men can react, a woman normally won't. She is pissed off, but she won't. And there's another thing: when you react, it's because you're having PMS, because you don't have a man... If a guy gets angry, he's tough, a woman, when she reacts, she has PMS, she's blunt, she's bossy. I've had that said to me. They wouldn't say that if a guy were to do the same thing I'm doing. One thing that was common to ask years ago when you were in a competition or going through an interview to a head position: how did you see being a leader of men? Do you think you'll have problems leading men? I've always found this question a really strange one! I'd tell them that to me it was irrelevant. It's never been a problem, but in their mind, they had this concern about putting a woman to lead men.

As explained by the interviewees, gender stereotypes manifest themselves through various facets within the organization, which points to what was mentioned by Henderson et al. (2016), Nganga et al. (2023), Samuelson et al., (2019), and Teixeira et al. (2021). The reference to physical traits, like the voice, is used to discredit women as professionals and to question their ability to deal with conflict situations when leading teams formed by men, which is in line with the arguments of Beltramini et al. (2022) and Irigaray and Vergara (2009).

The fact that this reference occurred in a formal selection process of the institution suggests that these wrong impressions are at some level imbued in the BCB's culture, if we consider what Freitas (2015) said about the context, public policies, and corporate practices regarding diversity in Brazil. In addition, the accounts indicate that a more masculine attitude is desirable to the detriment of the interviewees' innate characteristics. This is in line with the stereotype whereby the innate leader has predominantly male characteristics, and whereby women tend (or are expected to) adopt male characteristics to advance in their careers, as argued by Eagly and Karau (2002), Kawakami et al. (2000), Oakley (2000), and Samuelson et al. (2019).

Considering the results analysis process, Box 2 summarizes the main results elaborated on in the analysis, as well as their associations with the theoretical premises described in the theoretical framework of the study.

Box 2
Summary of the process of results analysis

SUMMARY OF THE PROCESS OF RESULTS ANALYSIS		
Main results	Theoretical premises	Analysis
The trade-off between career advancement and family life	*Glass ceiling:* An invisible barrier that prevents women and other underrepresented groups from advancing hierarchically in corporations and reaching executive positions of high leadership (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986; Johns, 2013; Morley, 2007; Wrigley, 2009; Zhuge et al., 2011).	The trade-off between career advancement and family life is something persistent for women. At times, when they are considered for high leadership positions, they think about family and childcare to the detriment of their careers. Such thoughts are not usually identified in male professionals.
Socialization difficulty in a mostly male environment	*Professional maze:* Complex barriers encountered throughout the professional path of women and other underrepresented groups towards high leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007a; Morrison et al., 1991; Samuelson et al., 2019).	The socialization difficulty in a mostly male environment impacts women's professional ascension. The more frequent interaction between male professionals contributes to their names being placed/recommended for career advancement.
The organizational culture validating gender stereotypes	*High leadership:* DAS-1 to DAS-6 (and equivalent) positions, whose holders are responsible for decision making at strategic and managerial levels within the Federal Public Administration. And *Organizational culture:* the importance of culture in building and reproducing organizational stereotypes and values (Freitas, 2015; Lei Complementar nº 175, 2021).	When the organizational culture validates gender stereotypes, processes of ascension to strategic positions are negatively impacted for women.

Source: Elaborated by the authors and data from the study based on Eagly and Carli (2007a); Freitas (2015); Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986); Johns (2013); Lei Complementar nº 175 (2021); Morley (2007); Morrison et al. (1991); Samuelson et al. (2019); Wrigley (2009); Zhuge et al. (2011).

Considering these results, the study indicates that, in the BCB, there are still characteristics of an organizational culture influenced by stereotypes (Freitas, 2015) that sometimes sets up resistance to gender diversity in leadership positions, as explained by Munhoz (2000). Beyond this observation, other discussions emerge from this summary of the process of data analysis, which are presented below.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained in the analysis process support three central discussions. The first concerns the numerous roles played by women and the difficulties they face in reconciling the mother, wife, caregiver, and professional roles. The point to be stressed is that over their professional life, potentially, women experience a feeling of overload due to the range of duties (besides professional ones) they perform, while also considering that they are not performing any of these well enough, suggesting a strong presence of self-demand.

The combination of overload, self-demand and numerous duties suggests that women encounter, in their career development towards high leadership positions, a persistent narrow margin of choices to renegotiate their roles. Since full responsibility for the care of family, marriage and children is centralized in the woman, the professional dimension ends up being given less priority. In other words, the idea of the existence of a trade-off between career progression and the family role that women play or wish to play is pervaded by the few alternatives which women identify to reconcile career progression.

The demand for good performance as a mother, professional and caregiver, in addition to the questioning about the ability to obtain a performance commensurate with the high positions occupied, constitutes the "labyrinth" through which women navigate, including in the development of their careers. If for women there is a scenario with a reduced margin of alternatives, for men we find faster access to a portal with many possibilities, without compromising career progression.

A second discussion theme, raised by the results analysis, concerns the importance given to socialization with work colleagues as a mediated strategy of (privileged) access to more career progression opportunities. The point here is not the importance of networking per se within the work environment. We highlight the fact that, the BCB's environment being predominantly male, there are difficulties facing women in accessing this (non-formal) social interaction that enables appointments for career progression in the bank, for example. In other words, professional ascension in the BCB is intrinsically linked to the contact network an employee possesses within the work environment. And because this is a predominantly male environment that inhibits informal socialization with women, the female condition puts them at a disadvantage from the start of the race to leadership positions.

What is behind a discussion about this is that there seems to be favoritism in the BCB among men, through the networking that they more frequently foment in the work environment. This ends up influencing (though theoretically not on purpose) the small number of women in high leadership positions. We add yet another dimension. Even though access to jobs at the BCB takes place through public service competition, a process that presupposes isonomy towards candidates, we have observed that career progression dynamics, unlike career access ones, are measured by the socialization relationships in a mostly male environment, which prioritizes personal connections and contacts with peers, rather than an isonomic process in career advancement. The absence of this social capital for women has a major influence on their professional ascension process in the Central Bank of Brazil, also corroborating the impacts of gender stereotypes on the professional dynamics experienced by women.

We thus arrive at the third discussion point: when gender stereotypes systematically impact, within an organization, the processes of ascension to more strategic positions, we can consider that the BCB's organizational culture, by validating gender stereotypes, imposes on women a professional environment with reduced career progression chances. The reference to women's physical traits, such as their voice, which was used to question their ability to deal with conflict situations and lead teams formed by men, endorses an organizational culture which, whether covertly or explicitly, considers women as "guilty" until they prove otherwise through their professional performance. At the same time, it considers men as the "standard".

An organizational culture that validates gender stereotypes that impact women's professional ascension, it is alarming to find that this culture, biased by its gender stereotypes, interfere with the institution's selection processes of appointment for high leadership positions within the BCB. In a larger scale, we can also suggest that an organizational culture influenced by gender stereotypes is, from the start, a culture resistant to the diversity of its workforce.

CONCLUSIONS

We conducted this study to identify the professional challenges faced by women who have risen to leadership positions at the Central Bank of Brazil. After the analysis process, we concluded that the most recurrent account in the interviews concerns the trade-off between professional progression and the dedication to family. For women at the BCB, accepting a promotion almost always represents making a choice between their career and their children/family. This concern emerged in conversations both with women who have encountered this situation before, and with those who chose not to have children. This shows that this aspect is relevant in women's decision making, even though it is not a common condition to all of them. But the worry about the trade-off is not limited to children. The interviewees recognize that women are assigned the caring role, not only towards children, but also the home, and sometimes their parents and other family members, which adds further weight to this question for women to decide on the direction of their professional lives.

A second, very characteristic aspect of the study is related with the importance of networking for career progression and the difficulty for women at the BCB to socialize, interact and penetrate the organization's mostly male networks. A common understanding is that opportunities are most frequently offered first among men who know each other well, interact more regularly, and therefore women end up being deprived as they are not integrated into these social groups.

A third aspect is that the research findings showed that there is still a series of manifestations of gender stereotypes in the BCB, which end up making the environment awkward, uncomfortable and, at times, discouraging for women. The fact that there are accounts that these manifestations took place within the bank's formal selection processes can indicate that this attitude is, at some level, rooted in the BCB's organizational culture.

Considering these aspects of the study, it is possible to conclude that the glass ceiling concept seems too simple to encompass all the nuances that interfere with women's careers in public service, which emerge in the form of a professional maze. In this respect, this article contributes for organizations to rethink their organizational practices, so as to promote people management policies capable of promoting greater diversity among managers in high leadership positions. What is at stake, in this case, is not only the recognition of the numerous challenges facing women in their paths that culminate in high leadership positions. But the understanding that reaching this point in the career, when it happens at all, involves the winding passage through a series of labyrinthine barriers that delay (sometimes prevent) their arrival at high leadership positions. Somehow, this conclusion corroborates the perspective that people management practices at public institutions tend to mirror the practices in effect in private sector institutions, as seen in the joint maintenance of the still reduced female presence in organizations' high leadership positions.

Because we consider that the theme discussed in this research requires an agenda of its own in the field of management, we indicate below a few possibilities for future studies about the scarcity of women in leadership positions in public service. An alternative for future studies is to conduct research that investigates more in depth, from the perspective of men, the aspects raised by women. Expanding this research to a wider and more transversal sample space can also bring relevant findings. Another approach that we suggest concerns investigating the impressions of women who have not yet succeeded in advancing to head, management, and leadership positions in public service, and determine whether the barriers are similar to those faced by women who have achieved this goal.

Given the series of manifestations of gender stereotypes identified in the Central Bank of Brazil, which end up making the environment awkward, embarrassing and, at times, discouraging for women, the fact that there are accounts that these manifestations have occurred within formal selection processes suggests that identifying the professional challenges faced by women who have risen to leadership positions in the public service is a way of rethinking practices in circulation within these organizations. Despite all the challenges faced by women who have risen to high leadership positions within public service organizations, this study is an ode and reverence to the career trajectories that these women are able to make, despite all the barriers and mazes that compose their professional paths.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

The dataset supporting the results of this study is not publicly available.

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